

Charlevoix: Quebec's Rugged Riverside Realm



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I cover the world of travel with gusto...literally, the world. [FULL BIO](#) ✓

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The [Train de Charlevoix](#) glides for some 78 miles between Quebec City and the town of Malbaie, clinging tight to the rocky and wooded banks of the St. Lawrence River the entire way. In operation for less than a decade, the delightful electric train recreates the original journey first started by steam engines back in 1889.



The Train de Charlevoix makes a stop at Le Germain hotel in Baie-Saint-Paul.—Courtesy Pierre Gouyou Beauchamps/Tourisme Québec

Generations ago, white steamships coming from the States used to deliver loads of summer visitors to Quebec's [Charlevoix region](#) on the St. Lawrence, and a burgeoning tourism scene developed in particular around the riverfront town of Malbaie. For many American travelers today, however, the name Charlevoix draws a collective blank.

Sure, you know that Quebec is vast and gorgeous, and historically rich. But you likely didn't know that Charlevoix—a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve famous for its fall colors, old gristmills, whale watching, and ski slopes—is just four hours from Montreal, ninety minutes from Quebec City, and closer for East Coasters than most U.S. states. And to boot, the dramatic [Montmorency Falls](#) just outside of Quebec City wows travelers as it cascades just off the train tracks and highway.



The roots of Charlevoix tourism go back to the historic Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu in Malbaie.—Courtesy Paul Hurteau/Claude Parent/Tourisme Québec

When they arrive in Malbaie, visitors can learn all about this stunning region's past at the [Museum of Charlevoix](#). These days, however, something big in small-scale farming is going on in the Charlevoix countryside, and countless agro treats delight guests who follow the [Flavour Trail](#).

The alliterative [Champignons Charlevoix](#) sounds like it could be a national brand name (or, a band name for that matter). If you've never heard of this family-run operation's *pleurotes*, you do know them as oyster mushrooms. At the 'shroom house located on a lovely stretch of road outside of Malbaie, mushrooms aren't just cultivated, but all manner of sauces and condiments and jarred fungi goodies are sold in the small boutique.

Just outside of Baie-Saint-Paul, a town of slightly more than 7,000 residents on the sleepy Gouffre River, the [Laiterie Charlevoix](#) is a dairy farm spread out over several facilities and anchored by a white farmhouse. Their marvelous little museum is filled with vintage French language milk ads from well before the war period and old milk bottles whose graphic lettering is lovely. Of course, it's impossible to leave their small boutique without large cheesy purchases in tow.

Two Laiterie Charlevoix projects are garnering local attention. The dairy is in the forefront of reintroducing the classic Canadienne breed of cows whose origins date to 17th-century France, but whose numbers had dwindled dangerously low. The facility has also developed an environmentally-friendly system of converting whey into methane gas used for heating the vast amounts of water needed in the production of cheese.



The rugged Zec des Martres is one of Charlevoix's many wilderness areas.—Courtesy Steve Deschenes/Tourisme Québec

Who doesn't love ripe, succulent and juicy heirloom tomatoes? Imagine them as wine and you have Omerto, an apertif wine produced by the family-run [Domaine de la Vallée du Bras](#) in the hills outside of Baie-Saint-Paul. Their unusual and guarded technique which produces wines at around an 18% alcohol level was originally brought by the Miche family from Belgium, and is practiced nowhere else.

If you've ever felt emu were missing from your diet or skin care regimen, the [Centre de l'Émeu de Charlevoix](#) is yet another family-run operation along the Gouffre River, where old barns and farmhouses are scattered around the stunning countryside. The ranch's cute breeding emus are on display in pens, while the ultimate destiny for their offspring is to become emu steaks, as well as emu oil which has powerful skin-health properties, and a slew of emu-derived products.



The slopes plunge almost into the river at Le Massif de Charlevoix in Petite Rivière Saint-François.—Courtesy Marc Archambault/Tourisme Charlevoix

For its part, the town of Baie-Saint-Paul is known for having the largest number of art galleries in Canada. Bringing together local and international artists, the annual [Rêves d'Automne](#) festival just took place in late-September. The main commercial street of St. Jean Baptiste, lined with galleries, boutiques and eateries that have taken over centuries-old homes, is closed off for the event to accommodate the crowds who linger at artists' kiosks and enjoy live Québécois street music.

Also on St. Jean Baptiste street, the restaurant [Le Saint-Pub](#) features the popular and potent craft brews produced by the MicroBrasserie Charlevoix. Anytime of the year (well, maybe not winter), Charlevoix locals and guests lunch on the back deck of the [Mouton Noir](#) bistro to enjoy the tranquility of the Gouffre River flowing below.

Near Malbaie, the [Maison du Bootlegger](#) was indeed an old bootlegger's house where today meats are grilled up in the attic loft while you sit at long, rustic wooden tables under low beams and enjoy the raucous atmosphere that never slows down.

For the ultimate in dramatic Charlevoix experiences, [Héli Charlevoix](#) on the outskirts of Baie-Saint-Paul will take you up in the air for breathtaking perspectives from their four-seater helicopter. In winter, you spot moose in the naked woods below, while in summer pilots will land on nearby mountain peaks for views of the Charlevoix Crater, the 350-million-year-old, 35-mile-wide meteorite crater that forms the heart of Charlevoix today.

Lodging Notes:

One of those great old chateau hotels that Canada once specialized in, the 1920s [Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu](#) in Malbaie lies right on the St. Lawrence River, with a casino, golf, skiing, and more outdoor activities. The Pedneault boutique in the hotel sells ciders honeys, jams, and endless Charlevoix farm products.

Also overlooking the St. Lawrence in Malbaie, the [Auberge 3 Canards](#) is known for its fine-dining restaurant. From the cozy lobby with a fireplace in the original house, the hotel branches into a labyrinth of hallways and guest rooms.